

COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS OFFICERS' NEED FOR SELF-DEFENSE SURVIVAL TRAINING

*by David Guglielmi, Parole Agent, Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

Very few corrections agencies provide comprehensive self-defense training. Self-defense training in its purest form is usually neglected, in part because of the large amount of time already required for weapons training and training on arrest-oriented defensive tactics. Other reasons for neglecting self-defense training include budget constraints and the lack of available training sites.

The major systems used in training, such as Pressure Point Control Tactics, offer some basics in self-defense, as they provide training in blocking punches as well as in counterattacks, kicks, and punches. They also train officers in wrist locks and grappling to establish control of a subject who is resisting arrest. However, these systems are focused on establishing physical control of an arrestee within a very specific use-of-force continuum. This limits the amount of force used by an officer to the amount required to m-establish control and complete the arrest process.

In order to avoid liability suits, most training programs place a good deal of stress on the importance of preventing injury to the subject. The need for knowledge of the force continuum and a sensitivity to liability issues cannot be stressed enough when training community corrections officers. However, these officers often have to work in high-crime areas and with extremely violent offenders and their families. As a result, an officer may be subject to physical assault by one or more assailants who may not be related to the offender. The skills and tactics for defending oneself in a sudden and violent assault are usually not practiced sufficiently in arrest-oriented training. What is needed to deal with such situations is training that is survival-oriented.

The importance of Survival Training

Community corrections officers should therefore be given regular self-defense training that is oriented to survival. Such training should provide them with the skills required to cause immediate severe pain and injury to an assailant. These skills are needed to prevent an initial disabling injury to the officer and to provide an opportunity for the officer to escape from a situation without being subjected to a prolonged and possibly lethal assault

Many officers have lost their lives because they have been knocked unconscious in an initial assault and have had their weapons removed from their holsters and used against them. Female officers, too, need such training, as they are often required to make visits on sex offenders and can become victims of sexual assault. Self-defense training improves or creates the skills needed to survive in such situations. This

training can also improve an officer's tactical knowledge and awareness, which can assist him or her in avoiding potentially dangerous situations.

What is Learned in Self-Defense Training?

Self-defense training is not just a set of situation-specific responses that can be taught in a 3-hour training session. Such training provides a number of advantages, including the improvement of balance and movement skills. Because self-defense training also tests an officer's physical fitness and physical abilities, it may help the officer recognize a need to improve his/her overall physical fitness. Having a regular opportunity to practice with others also develops an understanding of the human body and its strengths and points of vulnerability.

The simulation of physical conflict with protective equipment, such as a "red man suit," gives the officer a chance to experience the dynamic nature of a physical conflict and to deal with the feelings generated by being attacked or having to attack another person. The first response of an officer with no previous experience of physical conflict may be to panic and do nothing.

Self-defense training also includes a tactical component that improves an officer's skill at recognizing potentially vulnerable situations, keeping a proper distance from a potentially hostile person, and positioning the body so that it is least vulnerable to attack. With comprehensive self-defense training over an extended period, an officer tends to assume a subtle change in posture and attitude, which makes him or her less likely to be viewed as a victim and consequently attacked.

Conclusion

Policymakers in community corrections agencies are most often in administrative positions. They do not face the hazards faced by a line officer, but the hazards are nevertheless real. The costs to an agency, an officer, and the family are very high when an officer is severely injured on the job.

A comprehensive self-defense training program will increase an officer's arrest skills, improve the officer's confidence in the field and in the office, make the officer less susceptible to intimidation by an offender, and increase the officer's overall effectiveness on the job.

On an agency level, the result is reduced injuries to officers and offenders and an overall decrease in liability-producing incidents. If self-defense training cannot be provided on an inservice basis, an agency should arrange to provide agents with time and funding to participate privately in a self-defense or martial arts program.

For additional information, contact David Guglielmi, Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole, Philadelphia District Office; telephone (215) 560-2091. ■